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ABSTRACT

Many communities throughout the United States are experiencing a large influx of Central American immigrants. Langley Park, Maryland is typical of the pockets that are formed by the new arrivals. Community members of Latino background now account for 60% of the population, while in 1990 they were only 40% (US Census, 2000). As the immigrants move into Langley Park, both the formal and informal educational systems are faced with the task of preparing children and young adults to succeed in an increasingly complex and competitive society where proficiency in technology is becoming a requirement for success. This paper presents a subset of a larger ethnographic study. Here cases of nine Central American female immigrants who have chosen to take technology related training are presented in order to reveal their behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs towards technology use. Information was collected through observations and interviews while providing the participants with training in basic computer usage. (Contains 88 references.) (Author)

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PARTICIPATION IN A TECHNOLOGICAL WORLD: THE MEANING OF EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY IN THE LIVES OF YOUNG ADULT CENTRAL AMERICAN IMMIGRANTS

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Key Words: technology, immigrants, computers

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Abstract

Many communities throughout the US are experiencing a large influx of Central American immigrants. Langley Park, Maryland is typical of the pockets that are formed by the new arrivals. Community members of Latino background now account for 60% of the population, while in 1990 they were only 40% (US Census, 2000). "The increasing Hispanic population has had an impact on everything from political campaigns to business marketing" (Cohn and Fears, 2001). As the immigrants move into Langley Park, both the formal and informal educational systems are faced with the task of preparing children and young adults to succeed in an increasingly complex and competitive society where proficiency in technology is becoming a requirement for success. This paper presents a subset of a larger ethnographic study. Here cases of nine Central American female immigrants who have chosen to take technology related training are presented in order to reveal their behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs towards technology use. Information was collected through observations and interviews while providing the participants with training in basic computer usage.

Introduction

Many communities throughout the US are experiencing a large influx of Central American immigrants. Langley Park, Maryland is typical of the pockets that are formed by the new arrivals. In the Langley Park community, the Latino population increased from 6,956 to 10,294 over the 1990s (Barrio de Langley Park Newsletter, 2001). Community members of Latino background now account for 60% of the population, while in 1990 they were only 40% (US Census, 2000). As immigrants move into Langley Park, both the formal and informal educational systems are faced with the task of preparing children and young adults to succeed in an increasingly complex and competitive society where proficiency in technology is becoming a requirement for success.

The study took place in the context of a larger ethnographic project which began in 2000 in one of the urban areas of Maryland surrounding the District of Columbia. Here cases of nine Central American female immigrants who have chosen to take technology related training are presented in order to reveal their behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs towards technology use. Data was collected through observations and interviews over the course of six months while providing the participants with training in basic computer usage over the Winter and Spring of 2002.

Significance of Study

As Hispanic[1] immigration to the U.S. continues to increase, it must become a focus of our educational technology policy. Career choice patterns of the Latino population indicate a lack of familiarity with and knowledge of the use of technology for employment. Studies by the Maryland State Department of Education and the US Government[2] have pointed to a growing gap between the technological haves and have nots. Referred to as the "digital divide"[3], some population groups are less likely to have computers and other technology based learning tools at school and/or at home. Although technology use isn't the only factor that contributes to educational and career "success", it is an important one because employment is becoming increasingly dependent on one's fluency with technology. As a result, educational initiatives and policies are being designed to target this technology gap.

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[1] The term "Hispanic" is used by many agencies (such as the Bureau of the Census), to collect and distribute population data. The term designates "individuals [who] immigrated to the United States or are native-born U.S. citizens who self-identify under several national origin designations (e.g., Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Guatemalan, Salvadoran) or racial/ethnic group (e.g., Chicano, Latino, mestizo, Hispanic)" (Padilla in Freidenberg, 2000, p. 275). For a thorough analysis of the Latino/a-Hispanic debate, see Oboler (1995). In the 2000 census, for the first time the U.S. census bureau asked Hispanics to distinguish themselves by origin. Surprisingly, 17% did not pick one group, but designated themselves as other, which may mean for example, a mixture of Salvadorian and American or Latino and African American. While I prefer the term "Latino," I will use both terms throughout this paper.

[2] **Falling Through the Net Series,** National Telecommunications and Information Administration, US Department of Commerce, July 1995, July 1998, July 1999, and October 2000

[3] In the context of this paper, the "digital divide" is the gap between those students who have access to and make effective use of technology for education (formal and informal) and those who do not. This same concept can also refer to a divide in technology access for workers, or the general population.

In today's society computer literacy is the "basic skill" of an information-based economy and workforce. Many jobs require at minimum, basic computer fluency. Yet, data demonstrates that Hispanics do not have access to computer technology at home or at school, therefore are more likely not to be computer literate, and are unqualified for these jobs. The "fault line" is most emphatically real between those who can use technology to process information and those who cannot. Thus, a method to bridge this gap is needed. Clearly, a qualitative understanding of Central American immigrants' attitudes toward technology, could help build such a bridge. The objective of my research is to examine the participation, experience, and stories of Central American immigrants in the Langley Park, Maryland area, in regards to technology use, so as to ascertain their needs and offer policy recommendations.

The divide between the technological haves and the have nots results in impacts beyond the group in question. The US economy is increasingly dependent on a technologically literate work force[4]. As the economy grows, this need grows accordingly. Thus, the need to increase the technical fluency of the immigrant expands beyond benevolence; it becomes a capitalist imperative. Economic costs to society of a technologically uneducated workforce are well documented[5]. Government at all levels has turned its attention to formulating policies to increase technology literacy.

C. Suarez-Orozco and M. Suarez-Orozco (1995) argue that the U.S. education models use middle-class majority-culture traits as the yardstick for normality, making

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[4] See Lenhart (2000), Milken (1998), Oakes (1990), Sanders and Stone (1986), and US Department of Commerce (1995,1998, 1999, 2000)

[5] See Catterall (1985), Fine (1991), Tucker (1997), and US Department of Education (1993, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2000)

ethnic and minority deviations from this arbitrary standard pathological.[6] Others[7] argue that the American assessment measures are mechanistic and do not account for human agency, group variability or change. Statistical data taken from assessment scores, for example, often drives policy commitments. However, this data is collected on a stand-alone basis, divorced from the educational social context[8]. These initiatives tend not to look at the broader cultural content both in and out of school that influence the population at risk[9].

The cultural content of immigrant lives cannot be examined solely by quantitative data, which only highlights a small portion of the larger complex story. For example, are the goals of the immigrant those of the others in the U.S., or have they remained true to their country of origin? What are their definitions of success? What factors relate to what McDermott (1977) refers to as a *context* for learning,[10] and impact substantially on achievement[11] but are generally ignored. Many immigrants speak little or no English.

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[6] See Suárez-Orozco, C & Suárez Orozco, M. (1995). p. 58

[7] See Gumperz (1981), Carter and Segura (1979), Delgado-Gaitan and Trueba (1991), Suarez-Orozco (1986, 1987), Suarez-Orozco C. & Suarez-Orozco M. (1995), Trueba (1989a, 1989b, 1993), and Trueba, Rodriguez, Zou, and Cintron, (1993)

[8] See Levinson (1993), Muniz (2000), Schiefelbein, E. and Schiefelbein, P. (2000), and Suarez-Orozco C. & Suarez-Orozco M. (1995)

[9] See Muniz (2000), Suarez-Orozco C. & Suarez-Orozco M. (1995), and Trueba (1989a, 1989b)

[10] Margaret Mead's famous book *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) reminds us that there is a distinction between education and schooling. Mead shows how education can be a larger part of what Levinson (1998) terms "enculturation", the constant learning of cultural knowledge.

[11] See Failde and Doyle (1997), Izquierdo and Sanchez (2000), and Levinson (2000).

They are often well behind the educational pace of U.S. students, as their home countries offer limited formal educational opportunities. Compounding the difficulties immigrant youths face in school is the fact that they often need to work to help support their families financially (Suarez-Orozco C. & Suarez-Orozco M., 1995). They may hold two jobs or may be asked to care for siblings while other members of the family work. Most policy makers do not include these factors. Instead their design focuses mainly on school based performance assessments. By neglecting other aspects of students' lives, standardized assessment results done in the educational arena present an oversimplified quantitative picture of complex cultural issues.

To form a more complete picture of recent Central American immigrants, one should not be limited to the conventional educational environment[12]. Research studies[13] have shown that students conduct themselves differently at school, work, play, and home. An understanding of the broader life conditions that impact on students can help to formulate more constructive policy recommendations. It is important to know the context in which student educational experiences are contained, and what forces act to mold their educational aspirations. Both my experiences over the last seven years with this community and the literature review conducted for this study indicate that this

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[12] Education should not refer only to the classroom. Education is the uniquely human method of acquiring, transmitting, and producing knowledge, which serves to interpret and act upon the world. For education to be effective, individuals must be able to design their own educational resources from their available cultural resources. In an integrated society, education can be a balancing act between group interests and individual concerns (Levinson, et. al., 2000, p. 2).

[13] See Evans and Boyte (1992), and Levinson, Foley and Holland (1996)

groups' needs largely go unrecognized by policy makers who seek solutions only in response to more standard assessment measures.

In order to gain insight into these complex issues, and to better understand how cultural background, as well as the behaviors and attitudes toward educational technology, plays into the lives of this group, a qualitative study was undertaken, of which the results presented here are but a piece. This larger study used an interpretive perspective to examine the use of educational technology in the broader cultural context, Information gathered will be used to gain an understanding of the perceptions, aspirations, and behaviors of this population towards technology use that will have implications for educators and policymakers who want to help narrow the digital divide, and who want to make a positive difference in Latino immigrant learning, achievement and persistence in technology knowledge and skills.

Personal Experience and Interest

My interest in Central American immigrants grew while teaching chemistry within the Montgomery County Public School system from 1994 to 2000 and simultaneously serving as advisor to the Technology Club and Girls Computer Club at a predominately "Hispanic" high school (65% Hispanic, primarily El Salvadoran immigrants). Over this same time period, I began graduate school in the College of Education at the University of Maryland, College Park, with a focus on educational policy and leadership. In addition to taking the core education classes, my research interest directed me toward classes in qualitative research, sociology, and anthropology. I applied the knowledge gained in my graduate work to my teaching, and through action research I was able to investigate Hispanic attitudes toward technology, but only in a

limited manner. Survey questionnaires, interviews, and participant observations were all accomplished during a short period of time. Even such a limited investigation revealed some commonalties within this Latino group, as well as differences between this group and other ethnicities.

Previously I had worked in Prince George's County, in a predominantly African-American school. Many aspects of the Latino culture differed from my previous school; the strong importance of socializing, the desire to work in groups, and the lack of free time (many worked after school to help support the family) were facets of the culture that would require different teaching techniques than I was currently employing. A student could not be expected to come after school for extra help if he/she had to work to support his family or watch his siblings so his parents could work. Cultural exploration had begun. I undertook other ethnographic pilot studies, which revealed beneficial aspects of technology for both this group, and other groups for whom English was not their primary language, or whose English was severely limited. For example, when writing papers, the computer gave students a means of checking spelling and grammar without having to be embarrassed by their lack of mastery of the English language. Thus, the computer served not only as an instructional tool, but also as a means for building self-confidence and increasing their knowledge of the English language.

Current Investigation

Originally, I began to observe this community via an open laboratory at a local technology center, housed in an elementary school where the Community College also taught introductory computer courses. However, no one seemed to come to the laboratory. I was told by the director of the community center that local residents felt

that the computers were for courses only. At her urging I started two introductory computer courses in the evenings at the computer laboratory in the community center (within the same building) offered via the Parks & Recreation department. I offered to teach the courses at no cost to the residents, but the director said that a nominal fee makes the residents feel that the course has worth; a free course either has a catch or is worth what they are paying. For the first sessions, I had 5 students in one class and four in the other, all women. There was one student in her 60's, two in their late teens, and the rest were in the late twenties through the mid 30's. The courses really connected with the community, and fifteen students are currently signed up for each of the next two sessions, including all nine students returning. Through discussion with the students and my observations, I have extracted some of the central themes which have made the courses successful, based on the needs and desires of this audience. The goal of my work was not to train computer experts; it was to help computers become approachable.

Themes

For this discussion, I will summarize the themes in three broad subject areas. First, I will discuss the course content which made it desirable to the participants. Second, the subject matter chosen and how it was presented will be examined. Finally, descriptions of how I observed a feeling of empowerment arise in these students will be discussed.

As indicated previously, rather than having a free course, there was a small fee associated for the course: $35 for a six week session. In contrast, the community college offered a 14 week course for prices ranging from $75 to $100. From a price standpoint, they are nearly identical, however, the smaller up front course allows a trial period, i.e. I

will try it and if I don't like it I can stop. More importantly, the formality of a community college course was intimidating to those who wished to work in a more informal setting. The community college had a number of forms that needed to be filled out, as well as an application with an additional fee (one time only). The Parks and Recreation department has a simple form which solely required a name and address. The extensive paperwork can appear to be a huge hurdle to someone who's English is poor. Additionally, they may not feel qualified to take a "college" course, even though it is directed at their level. A more casual, community center program permits them to come to the class and not feel that there are any requirements – either real or imaginary.

The subject matter of my course was tailored to what the participants interest. I was surprised to learn that half of the students had computers at home. Participants wanted to learn how to use the word processor, make cards, posters, take pictures, and save their work. They wanted to learn basic computer skills that could help them in their everyday life and make it easier. For word processing practice I would provide a page of text, utilizing different color, style, and size fonts, indenting, lists, and other formatting used in standard documents, and had them replicate it. Step by step instructions were not given. Knowledge and skills were gained by doing. They learned they could not "break" the computer, and errors could be fixed. Class participants used a digital camera to get pictures, and downloaded other pictures from the internet to include in cards and posters. In word processor exercises, participants could start with either a blank document, or from a variety of templates provided. All the students wanted to print their work, save it to floppy, and bring it home to show their families and practice the exercises again, or use them for their own projects.

One of the participants wanted to learn ways to use the computer to help her business. She cleaned houses, not a profession you may think would require a computer. However, she wanted the computer to make her job more professional. She learned to download invoice templates that she could use for billing. She also learned to print business cards for advertising. Thus, the computer was being used to make her business more efficient, save her time, create advertisements, and help her succeed.

Finally, the computer seemed to empower these ladies, native Spanish speakers with varying English ability, to ease their transition into English, while keeping them connected with their homeland. The nine original students had a range of English abilities, from almost none to conversant. However, they all were excited about the spell-checking and grammar checking features of their word processors. Although not perfect, it at least allowed them to fix basic mistakes based on their limited English ability. For Internet sites, they learned to use several on-line translators to convert English language sites to Spanish. The translators were not perfect, but they allowed the participants to utilize previously incomprehensible sites. In fact, the imperfections of the translators gave them a chuckle, and showed them that in some ways they were superior to the computer.

The Internet allowed them access to a number of Spanish sites that enabled them to keep up with information "back home." They used on-line technology tutorials that were provided in Spanish to help them learn. They also utilized travel sites to find pictures of beaches and cities from their homeland, which they then incorporated into their processing documents. Thus, they found that rather than language being an additional barrier keeping them from computers, they found that technology exists in

their native language and can help them operate in a predominantly English speaking society.

Conclusion

The information presented here is a small part of a larger study, and are focused on a small group with particular interests. However, the themes extracted resonate with other research and observations made in the educational arena. Current policies are often drawn from the lessons learned with a middle class, white, English speaking society. Educational technology goals are directed toward career advancement, success on standardized tests, and facilitating curriculum. For this group, the goals are much simpler. How can the computer make ***my*** life easier, and help a Spanish speaker in an English speaking country? What tools are available to assist me as I don't have the time or expertise to start everything from scratch? These ideas represent a different cultural target toward which we should aim our educational dart. This study only shows us a small portion of the information we need; larger ethnographic/qualitative studies are needed to acquire a richer, more complete cultural description.

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